

Don't Get Too Close

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"Kee your distance" and "use the two-second following rule" are two warnings you hear repeatedly at driving school. As a firefighter and emergency-medical technician, I've often seen what happens when you ignore this advice. I didn't know how close it would hit home, though.

It was another beautiful, sunny weekend, and I was enjoying the beachfront scenery as I rode my motorcycle up a coastal highway. I tried to keep a two-second interval when traffic picked up in a town I passed through, but the attitude of drivers that afternoon seemed to be, "There shall be little or no space between vehicles."

A recent graduate of a motorcycle-safety course, I had made this ride many times and was confident I could react to any change in the current situation. I closed up with the vehicle in front of me so no one else could cut

me off. Besides, we're talking ego here—motorcycles just can't be cut off. Being in close quarters didn't really bother me because I was keeping an eye on the car in front of the one I was following.

The next thing I knew, I was in a sea of red brake lights. My first thought was, "What the &*\$?" Then, my safety-school training clicked in. I let off the throttle and looked over my shoulders. Can I switch lanes? Nope, there's a car on the right and a barrier on the left. "I've got to brake harder," I thought. "This is going to be close!"

Suddenly, the traffic started moving again, and I didn't have to stop completely, nor did I run into the car I had been tailgating. "OK, it's back to the two-second following rule for me," I thought. "I'd like to live to see tonight!"

If you don't understand the point of this article by now, I'll explain it. The rules of the road you learn in automobile-driving and motorcycle-safety schools are there for a reason: to keep a safe distance between you and the car you're

following! Two seconds is an easy way to tell if you're too close to another vehicle. If I had been more concerned about that rule, instead of my ego, I wouldn't have had such a close call.

Here's how to ensure you allow two seconds between you and the vehicle in front. When the rear bumper of that vehicle passes a sign or post on the roadside, you should be able to count "one thousand one, one thousand two," before the front bumper of your vehicle passes the same point. This rule only applies at speeds below 55 mph. For faster speeds, you should be able to count four seconds. Count three seconds at night, and allow four seconds or more during bad weather.

When drivers tailgate you, don't aggravate them by hitting your brakes hard. You may end up the loser. Instead, check your mirrors, and, when it's safe, signal and change lanes, or stop to let the other drivers pass. ■



Note the broken frame and misaligned forks on this motorcycle. Its rider wasn't speeding or following too closely, but he still rear-ended a car at 15 to 20 mph, then flew over it and landed 19 feet from the bike. Injuries included a hairline fracture of the pelvis, a head injury, a fractured left wrist, and a sprained left big toe. The bike was totaled. Imagine what could have happened if the rider had been speeding or following too closely.